West Country dilemma

What a dilemma - the countryside delights of rural Wiltshire or the urban route through historical Bath to Bristol? Gerry Mulvaney has the luxury of a decision as he boards his holiday narrow boat

We and our friends were on the Kennet and Avon canal, as guests of David Dare and Oxfordshire Narrowboats, at their recently opened base in Bradford on Avon. In the end, the unusually hot October weather, plus the closure of Hanham lock near Bristol for new gates, made the decision for us. We decided to spend a couple of days cruising to Devizes, before returning to explore Bath.

Buckby, one of seven boats that operate from their new base, was waiting for us and Tim Fisher, the base manager, showed us round the eight berth, seventy foot, stern cruiser. Oxfordshire Narrow Boats design and build their own fleet and they clearly understand their customer's needs. We were only two couples, but Buckby could sleep up to ten in a combination of bunks and beds, so we had plenty of room to rattle around. The two en-suite bathrooms pleased the ladies, as did the well-equipped kitchen and dining area, complete with a gas cooker, large fridge and cavernous cupboards. Whilst not understanding the technicalities of the Isuzu diesel engine, the ladies appreciated the fact it was very quiet, and delivered copious amounts of hot water for showers and even managed to power a small hair dryer. A digital TV/DVD player completed the extensive inventory.
Comprehensive handover
Although we are experienced boaters, Tim was at pains to point out a typical boat handover could take up to two hours, as the company want to be absolutely sure that hirers are confident they can handle the boat before they set out. This will include taking them through Bradford on Avon town lock, located conveniently next to the base. All the staff are enthusiastic boaters and Tim lives on a narrow boat next to the base, so you are in safe hands. Our handover took less time, but we were still treated to the bow to stern explanation of running the boat, before Tim waved us off from Bradford Wharf.

Leaving Bradford behind us, we headed towards Trowbridge with advice fresh in our minds. “The Kennet and Avon is different from most other canals. Stay cool and go with the flow. Don’t get wound up if a boat seems permanently moored on the water point, or the visitor moorings seems to be colonised by long stayers. Just relax, most people are very friendly, helpful and laid back.” It proved to be true, although water points were usually available, the rather hippy nature of some of the K & A’s residents, is somewhat at odds with Canal and River Trust’s usual regulated waterways.

Passing Trowbridge, our first night was spent moored just outside Semington, close to where the old Wilts and Berks canal joins the K & A. The warm evening was perfect for a barbeque, which meant we only had a drink at the 400-year-old Somerset Arms in the village, but the food looked inviting. The clear skies of the day, gave way to a magnificent view of the Milky Way, well away from light pollution, for our first night on Buckby.

In the swing!
Next day, our first lock of the trip was preceded by the need to open Seming-
ton swing bridge, a role the ladies took to with gusto. There are several swing bridges between Bradford and Devizes, providing a good gym workout alternative for the crew. The ladies were also in charge of locking on this trip, since they had decided they wanted to hone their skills. There was little opposition from me, so they took us up through Seend Cleeve and Seend, during what turned out to be the hottest day of the trip and the hottest October day in years, towards our second night stop at Foxhangers. It might seem that pubs feature a lot in this article, but that is only because there are rather a lot of very good ones close to or on the K & A and given the weather we experienced in the first few days, were a major draw. Special mentions for Wadworths Barge Inn at Seend Cleeve, with its canalside gardens and Three Magpies close to Martinslade Bridge. Both fed and watered us to a high standard and the wide range of beers of the Devizes brewery kept the men happy during the week.

Given our split itinerary, we moored just below lower Foxhangers bridge and set off to explore the famous Caen flight on our bikes. We simply did not have the time (and the ladies the inclination) to tackle the twenty nine locks that take the Kennet and Avon canal up to the Wiltshire Wolds. We were however lucky enough to encounter Andy Turner, the enthusiastic Canal and River Trust (hard to get used to BW’s new name!) lock keeper of the Caen flight. Andy is certainly passionate about his job and filled with information about the locks and their history. It was late in the day when we came upon him and he was busy filling and setting the sixteen lock Caen Hill flight for the start of the next day’s operations. Andy explained that the locks were the last part of the canal to be completed by John Rennie. They will use up to 32 million gallons of water a day, which is the reason for a pumping station at Lower Foxhangers Bridge, returning water to the top of the flight. There are very large side ponds to most of the flight to provide water for the locks and cope with the small pounds between locks.

Impressive Caen Hill
The locks can take between five and six hours to complete the rise to Devizes, so be warned. We had met up with another boat in Seend lock who were going all the way up. A British couple had invited their Russian friends for an English experience on the Kennet and Avon and the Russians were very impressed with the Caen flight. We noticed that Rosie and Jim seemed to have joined their party and everytime we turned round had mysteriously relocated to a different part of the boat, clutching the Union Jack and Russian Tricolour. I think someone was playing tricks, but on whom, was a mystery!

Bidding farewell to Andy Turner and leaving him to finish filling up the Caen Hill flight, we spent the night at Foxhanger bridge, before retracing our steps back to Bradford on Avon and mooring just before another of John Rennie’s masterpieces, the Avoncliff aqueduct. He completed this in 1801 and it carries the canal over both the River Avon and the later Bristol to Westbury railway. The aqueduct is also home to the famous 17th century Cross Guns pub, whose gardens fall down the side of the valley to the river Avon underneath the aqueduct. We had heard about the Cross Guns at a wine tasting in West Connemara (don’t ask!) so we were keen to visit. Their range of beers from the Box Steam Brewery is of particular note, but they also have an extensive menu. Over two visits we managed to taste them all, with their...
Piston Broke being my favourite. Mind you at 5% abv, it needs treating with respect otherwise you will find it is well named.

**Autumnal morning**

If the start of our trip was unseasonally warm, our trip west from Bradford on Avon was anything but. The skies clouded over and the temperature dropped as we reached Avoncliff and the next morning was definitely autumnal as we headed towards Bath. A couple of miles from Avoncliff is another aqueduct at Dundas, named after the first Chairman of the Kennet and Avon canal, taking the canal across the Avon to Dundas Wharf. We went down to the river to get a good view of Rennie’s masterpiece and on our return discovered the Dawdling Dairy, a cheese and ice cream shop on a narrow boat, moored close to the aqueduct. They are very good salespeople as we arrived back on our boat with three Snowdonia cheese truckles. Very tasty they were too. Dundas Wharf is also the junction with the Somerset Coal canal, which although closed in 1904, has had the first quarter mile restored to create the Brassknocker basin, so named after the large hill behind. A narrow entrance leads to a boatyard and small canal museum, worth a half an hour of your time.

The canal continues north from Dundas wharf towards the outskirts of Bath, passing the restored Claverton pumping station, which uses the power of the Avon to pump water up to the canal, again somewhere worth half an hour of your time. Next up was Bathampton, where the canal makes its entrance to suburban Bath and is home to the George Inn, where we stopped for an excellent lunch. Built on the site of a 13th Century monastery, it is full of olde worlde nooks and crannies, priest holes and log fires, with its own moorings on the side of the canal.

**Into Bath**

Now we started to make our way into Bath, beginning with two short tunnels, the second of which takes the canal under Cleveland House, the former canal company’s old headquarters building. It must have been a formidable site to passing boats in its heyday. We now got great glimpses of Bath as we headed south to the Widcombe lock flight, before dropping through the six locks, onto the River Avon. Following Tim Fisher’s advice at Bradford, we turned up river towards the famous Pulteney Bridge, where there are a small number of moorings alongside Bath Rugby Club. Aside from the view of the famous bridge and weir from the river, this is also the centre of Bath and a great place from which to explore the City on foot. We started with an open top bus tour, which in an hour gives you a view of all the sights and gives you the layout of the town. You could spend a long weekend exploring Bath, but we only had a day so crammed in the Roman Baths, Bath Abbey and the Royal Crescent. I drew the line at the Jane Austen Centre, leaving Mrs M and friend to do the literary tour while the men retired to the pub. Bath is full of eateries, with all the usual suspects, but there are also plenty of quirky and ethnic choices as well.

With Hanham lock gates being replaced and the route to Bristol closed, we returned to the entrance of the Kennet and Avon canal at Bath locks, to find a young angler, Duncan Cannings, struggling to land what turned out to be a four and a half pound pike onto the lock moorings. Taking on board Tim Fisher’s advice again, we waited in the river for him to land the fish and were rewarded with his smiling thanks. Now we were faced with the Widcombe locks again, but waiting for us were Sarah and Alan Read, together with their dogs Tarka the Labrador and Blossom the terrier, on their narrow boat Bumble. They had seen us standing off the lock moorings and rather than press on they kindly waited in Bath deep lock for us to join them. Another example of the nice people we met on the Kennet and Avon. We spent the next six locks chatting about their plans to retire next year and spend the summer exploring the UK canal network on their boat, I must admit it did sound tempting.

Retracing our steps the next day, we returned for our last night at Avoncliff and the Cross Guns pub, giving ourselves an hour’s cruise in the morning to get the boat back to the Bradford on Avon base for 9.00am. Tim Fisher was waiting with one last piece of advice. “The best breakfast on the canal is to be had at the Lock Inn with Dick and Jane, next to Bradford on Avon Lock”. Like the rest of his advice, it proved to be correct.

**RESOURCES**

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